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Role of local constraints in the failure of Western approaches to ELT

Ayaz Ahmad ^{a*}, Palwasha Sajjad ^b^a *Abdul Wali Khan University, Department of English, Mardan 23200, Pakistan*^b *Abdul Wali Khan University, Department of English, Mardan 23200, Pakistan*

Abstract

In Anglophone world some variables such as culture are considered insignificant and they are generally ignored in publication. In Mardan, a district of Pakistan, an exploratory study was conducted to know some of the local variables which become significant in the failure of popular Western approaches to language teaching. In this study teachers were found ill prepared to deal with local constraints in teaching. Majority of learners were found uncomfortable with the new practices due to their emotional sensitivity formed by local cultural, social and economic factors. Proper monitoring of new methods of language teaching was found essential for remedial measures.

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Keywords: Local constraints; state of the art technology; Language Teaching; failure in language learning

1. Introduction

Teachers and students live a life outside the class, which they bring to the class as well. When a teacher enters the class of English language in a place like Mardan (Pakistan), local context immediately becomes active. All decisions which the teacher would take in the class are seen by students and parents in their own cultural context. Teachers also expect from students customary respect and attention. The whole learning experience is conceived by teachers and students in the local cultural and social matrix.

In Pakistan formal training of English language teachers is a new venture. Some universities have started to offer Teaching of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) while many other offer a mixture of literature, linguistics and English Language Teaching (ELT)/ TOEFL. Teaching material comes from the leading western publishers for trainings of ELT trainee-teachers. In ELT such material is highly esteemed by trainee-teachers and in-service teachers used for consultation as a standard. The material prepared by the native Anglophone (western) writers for learners is based on the western context. Cultural factors in their context are presumed constant universally. It is not possible for such studies to have universal application. When applied in Mardan in ELT practice, these approaches fail due their incompatibility with local constraints.

* Ayaz Ahmad. Tel.: +92-334-8432207.
E-mail address: ayazmardan@gmail.com

2. Review of literature

Presently the native Anglophone writers lead the ELT community in research for innovations and improvements in teaching English as a second language. Their works are taught in rest of the world. In ELT approaches and methods such as Grammar Translation Method, Direct Method, Oral Approach and Situational Language Teaching and Audio lingual Language Method originated in the West and then promoted and improved by the Anglophone experts (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). In this list experimental methods such as Total Physical Response, Silent Way, Community Language Learning and Suggestopedia have been successfully tried by researchers in the west as new approaches (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Brown, 2000). Among these, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is cited as a global shift in language teaching. Different methods like The Natural Approach, Cooperative Language Learning, Content-Based Instruction, and Task-Based Language Teaching are considered as variants of CLT (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Brown, 2000). Essential features of CLT stemming from emphasis on performance and communication encourage teachers to adopt learners centred teaching, involving learners in activities, openness to culture of the native speakers and contact with natives are some of the activities (Zafar, 2008; Brown, 2000; Ellis, 2005; Ellis, 1997; Nunan, 1989; Swarbrik, 1994).

Local constraints especially those related to culture are important for any educational program (Lee, 2007). Culture provides a world view which determines the way we perceive the world around us (Whorf & Carroll, 1997). Culture plays a significant role in the success of language teaching. Possession of extra knowledge and skill is needed to deal with cultural issues (Sercue, et al., 2005, Fanson & Holliday, 2009). Krashen's Second Language Acquisition (SLA) hypothesis of Affective Filter (Krashen, 2009) can be closely related to cultural norms. Poverty of English language learning in Pakistan is attributed to inexperienced teachers, poor text books, subversion of textbooks and education for indoctrination and confusion regarding the status of English (Rahman, 1998; Naim, 2004; Warsi, 2004; Nayyar & Salim, 2003). In Pakistan recent shift to raise the standard of English language learning and teaching in English provides education goal in which English is envisioned to play a more dynamic and productive role (National Curriculum Document, 2002; National Education Policy, 2009). English Language Teaching Reforms (ELTR) project phase-II has been launched with this aim in view (HEC, 2010)

3. Methodology

Data were collected mainly from the population of teachers and students. Clarification of responses was carried out through reference to archival sources in Directorate of Schools and Literacy and Higher Education Department of the government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Pakistan), interviews with stake holders in education departments and outside. A sample of 100 learners (Higher Secondary School Certificate level with age range 17-20) and 40 teachers of English in district Mardan was randomly selected but, gender, socio-economic and urban/rural parity was ensured, especially in the learners. Their responses were recorded through two separate questionnaires then the validity of responses was confirmed through interviews and archival records. Responses were qualitatively and quantitatively analyzed using the insight from some of literature available on the relevance of culture in education and language education and basic statistical tests. Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 17 was used for exploratory data analysis and frequency distributions to guess trends and inclinations in the language learning environment of the sample, and therefore correctly test the initial hypotheses for this study.

Local constraints in this study are the local social, cultural, political and economic variables which exhibit substantial difference from their description in the general western literature on ELT and they negatively influence language learning when ignored in teaching and curriculum development.

3.1. Hypotheses tested

Some hypotheses were tested in this study. Sketch of the underlying hypotheses follows as under.

1. The following act as local significant constraints in English language teaching:
 - a. Student teacher role expectations in the class and their perceptions of methodology;
 - b. gender perception;
 - c. access to facilities determined by the economy of the household;
 - d. culturally induced emotional responses to otherness of native culture of English in the textbooks;
 - e. knowledge of National Education Policy, National Curriculum Document and language policy.
2. Teachers ignore the significance of local constraints in their teaching of English language.
3. Successful approaches to language teaching in the West fail locally due to cultural and social inclination of teachers and students.
4. Failures in the new methods result from lack of understanding about the compatibility of these methods with significant local constraints.

4. Results and Discussions

Most of the participating students in the study considered their teachers of English to be very serious in the class. Majority of them also viewed their teacher as a stern authoritative person who always commands. Though most of the students wanted to have debates, group discussions and language games and other activities in their class, many of these were reluctant to be the first to do it if asked to volunteer. Presence of class fellows of the opposite gender in a co-education was considered an inhibitive factor in participating in the essential activities of a class taught English through communicative method. Even teacher of opposite gender stopped students from volunteering and whole heartedly participating in the language class activities taught with the help of communicative method or other tested western technique of language learning. Rural participants along many others with low household income faced problem in access to internet, PC, textbooks and other language learning/acquisition aids. Most participant students though positive about English language were having a negative view of the English speaking people and their culture in the West. “English speaking people are bad and immoral and they would go to hell”, explained some of the participants in interview.

Majority of teachers were aware of the usefulness of modern methods of English language teaching but they were averse to applying them consistently in their class because they feared loss of discipline which they considered more important than achieving the learning goals. Textbooks and curricula are made to reflect national aspirations described in national education policy (NEP), national curriculum document (NCD) and language policy (LP) but majority of English language teachers viewed thorough knowledge of NEP, NCD and LP as useless and wastage of time. All teachers claimed to have consulted at least one book by a Western writer and viewed them highly valuable standard guides which a teacher of English must know thoroughly. None of the book had adequate discussion of effective handling of local cultural constraints. Teachers who had studied English language Teaching/ Teaching of English as Foreign Language or Teaching of English as a Second Language in their academic or professional qualification reported that they were taught how to teach vocabulary, grammar in detail but they were left to their own to deal with cultural issues in the class of English language. Hence these issues were not treated adequately in the western books on language teaching, teachers of English started to considered local constraints in language teaching as insignificant. Some teachers considered them bad habits to be removed through the techniques given in the books by western writers they had consulted.

Comparison of the responses of participant students and teachers in the study revealed some differences in their views about the relevance of local constraints. As most of the teachers ignored the significance of the local constraints in their responses, most of the students considered them very important. A considerable portion of students (41%) considered access to facilities, local cultural norms (speaking English in public by students was discouraged by elders socially) as an important factor in their failure in learning English. Only a very small number (15%) of teachers of English confirmed this view. Majority of teachers considered poorly trained teachers, textbooks and lack discipline to be the main causes behind failure of the popular western methods. Most of the teachers viewed these methods as best means but were not ready to implement the same in their own class. Some teachers claimed to have used communicative method, task based language teaching or other methods stated in the modern western literature on language teaching. But these teachers also added that they experimented with these methods and then abandoned them as they jeopardized their control on class. Majority of teacher considered a co-education class a

difficult challenge. This view corresponds with students' view, who felt anxiety in the presence of the class fellows of opposite gender.

Results of standardized general examination leading to Higher Secondary School Certificate conducted by the government run Board of Intermediate and Secondary School (BISE) Mardan showed students belonging to urban elitist schools performing better in English courses than students from rural government owned schools where poor non-elite children studied. This difference is attributable to socio-economic differences barring access to sources of learning such as internet, computers and audio-lingual material. Students' autonomy which is essential for the success of the popular methods in the west was considered an unwanted factor by the teachers who claimed to have training and studies in the modern methods of language teaching. Interview with teachers revealed in some training and courses they were asked to adopt learner centred approach but they opted not to use it in the class due to their trust in the traditional relation between teacher and student. As students thought teachers to be a stern authoritative figure so the teachers thought friendly relation between teachers and students as violation of accepted cultural norm. Parents and local community was opposed to such classes where learners would play and perform in drama, debates etc. These activities are recommended in teaching through communicative and task based language learning but local cultural norm discourage teachers from employing them in their lessons.

5. Recommendations

Despite the promising results in West, some variables which are ignored in their studies play significant role when the recommended practices are implemented in eastern context and these variable along those which are unique to the local environment influence learning outcome significantly. Sensitivity about local cultural, social and economic constraints would help in making informed decisions about the implementation of the successful language teaching practices in the West. It would be helpful to test western approaches to ELT locally—including the theoretical assumptions—locally and then formulate implementation strategies with continuous monitoring.

Besides the stated general recommendations, in the context of Pakistan some specific measures would be helpful.

1. Negative emotional attitude of learners about the native speakers needs due consideration
2. Parental distrust of the impact of ELT on religion and cultural traditions of learners need proper consideration in teaching and development of curricula.
3. Input of all stake holders in all steps of curriculum development
4. Teachers orientation training about National Education Policy and Language Policy and Planning of Pakistan
5. Establishment of bodies at local level to conduct studies for adaption and development of practices and continuous monitoring
6. Development of standard procedures on local basis for introducing new practices and suggest changes in existing practices
7. Tolerance of traditional approaches to language teaching is useful, because they are based on thorough knowledge of local constraints. If unavoidable remedial measures to be taken only after a carefully conducted study on the suitability of new approaches to ELT.
8. All language teachers need to be aware of significant local variables which act as constraints in English language teaching
9. All language teachers should be trained to use the significant local variables in a constructive way
10. All practices in ELT need popular cultural socio-political support locally.

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